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Fall 2019

## **Are All Politics Still Local? Variations in Local and National Political Participation in the United States**

Madeline Chandonnet Leonardos

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**Are All Politics Still Local?**

**Variations in Local and National Political Participation in the United States\***

Madeline Chandonnet Leonardos

Skidmore College

Word Count = 8157

\*Please direct all correspondence to Madeline Leonardos, 815 N. Broadway, Skidmore College,  
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866. E-mail: mleonard@skidmore.edu.

## ABSTRACT

Political participation is an ever-important facet of United States democracy, but do patterns of participation differ from the local to the national level? Do citizens participate more or less in one sphere of politics? This study utilizes data from the American National Elections Study Timeseries Survey from 2016 ( $N = 3447$ ) to examine the differences in local and national political participation based on interest in politics, ideological extremism, and education controlling for religious attendance, race, gender, and age. This study finds that on average, United States citizens participate less in local politics than national politics. Additionally, the regression model for local politics ( $R^2 = .109$ ) is statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) yet has less explanatory power than the regression model for national politics ( $R^2 = .164$ ), indicating that the independent and control variables are better at explaining variation in national participation. The strongest predictors in the national model were the three primary independent variables of interest. The predictors for the local model included religious attendance and gender. Ideological extremism was significant ( $p < .01$ ) in the national model, but not significant in the local model. These findings suggest that there are important discrepancies between local and national participation which should receive additional attention in future research.

## **Are All Politics Local Still?**

### **Variations in Local and National Political Participation in the United States**

Political participation is a defining aspect of democracy in the United States. Voting, engaging in campaigns, and attending protests and rallies are some of the ways Americans participate in the political process on the local and national level. However, inequality exists in all forms of political participation as it is generally agreed upon that those with less capital participate less in politics (Hauser 2000; Horowitz 2015; Levine 2017; Weber, Loumakis, and Bergman 2003). Equal representation is valuable because it signifies the health of the democracy, allowing it to work more efficiently for the people it serves (Hubbell 2013; Swanson 2001).

The meaning of politics and political engagement is undergoing a shift. The ways in which Americans interact with politics and political stimuli are fluctuating as well. In the social sciences, education is known as a consistently strong predictor for engagement in politics. However, as the nation's average level of educational attainment increases, the strength of the relationship between education and participation in politics is less certain (Horowitz 2015). Improvements in technology have significantly impacted how individuals connect to politics through social and news online media. The types of political information and how that information is presented to consumers is important in understanding attitudes towards current events and political systems (Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, and Samuel-Azran 2016). Politics are such a large part of everyday life that it can be challenging to pinpoint the most important factors in predicting engagement today. This study aims to test the validity of older theories on political participation using a contemporary perspective and recent data.

While many people acknowledge that political participation is an important facet of democracy, few understand how pervasive inequality in the United States governance processes.

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There are many different forms of discrimination and silencing in political participation from voter suppression and Gerrymandering to feelings of illegitimacy within the political system and other social factors that disincentivize participation. Disparity in political participation is an issue for several different reasons. Political engagement is an important indicator of the health and legitimacy of a democracy. When there is inequality in political processes, the results will perpetuate that inequality by only representing those who were able to participate. This study emphasizes uncovering the causal mechanisms in this relationship and identifying ways to address inequality in political participation.

While there are many factors of interest when examining disparities in political participation. Interest in politics, political ideology, and education stand encompass the issues and points of contention around understanding political engagement. Previous scholarship generally supports the notion that educational attainment is a strong and significant predictor of political participation, but within our fast-changing political landscape it is uncertain if class markers like education are still strong predictors of engagement. Logically, if someone is interested in politics, they are more likely to engage in politics. However, the meaning of interest and engagement are shifting as media use is dominating social interaction. Polarization and partisanship have become especially relevant in politics since Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2015. An individual's own partisanship can impact their political participation, but in an increasingly polarized society this can have different implications for an individual's decision to engage or disengage. Therefore, I hypothesize that (1) the more interested in politics a respondent is, the more likely it is that they will participate in national politics, (2) the more interested in politics a respondent is, the more likely it is that they will participate in local politics, (3) the more extreme

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a respondent's self-identified political ideology, the more likely they are to participate in national politics.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study relies on foundational basic theories of political engagement, focusing on how the three independent variables, interest in politics, ideological extremism, and education impact political engagement and participation. One of the main factors in understanding variations in political engagement is exposure to political stimuli: the greater one's exposure to political stimuli, the more likely they are to engage in politics (Almond and Verba 1963; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell, A., Gurin, and Miller 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Milbrath 1965). Level of education, interest in politics, and partisanship or ideology are three of the factors that can explain variation in exposure to political stimuli.

Those who have higher educational attainment will have greater exposure to political stimuli and will therefore participate more in politics (Almond and Verba 1963; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Milbrath 1965). This relationship is due in part to the fact that those who have completed at least some college will encounter more political stimuli. Individuals also tend to spend more time with those who have educational attainment that is similar to their own, which would increase exposure to political stimuli through the individual's social networks and by interacting with other college educated persons (Almond and Verba 1963; Milbrath 1965). Those who are more interested in politics will seek out more political stimuli than those who are less interested in politics (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Milbrath 1965). Individuals with strong party or candidate preferences expose themselves to more political stimulus, even if their mind is already made up for an election or political issue (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954;

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Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954; Campbell, A. 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Milbrath 1965). For the most part, those who identify strongly with a particular partisan group or are extreme in their ideology will seek out political information from similar lenses, and are more willing to seek out non-political information than that of moderates (Almond and Verba 1963; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Milbrath 1965). Exposure to political stimuli is the primary causal mechanism for conceptualizing the relationship between education, interest in politics, and ideological extremism and participation in politics. The ways in which demographic characteristics may impact exposure to political stimuli directly or as mediated through interest, extremism, or education is important to consider.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, research on political engagement focuses on two broad explanations for variations in participation. The individualist explanation argues that demographics and capital are what account for variation in participation (Laurison 2015; Levine et al. 2018; Schwadel 2012; Shaw, Foster, and Combs 2019). The institutionalist explanation asserts that institutional factors impact participation, such as bureaucratic processes of voting and the “professionalization” of political participation (Farnsley 2000; Hauser 2000; Horowitz 2015; Laurison 2015; Laurison 2016; Schwadel 2012; Shaw, Foster, and Combs 2019). Within these general concepts, researchers analyze the various factors in understanding participation, which for the purpose of this literature review are best captured in the following five themes: inequality, media use and political interest, education, political ideology and extremism, and religious participation.

The lack of literature on local political engagement initially informed the choice to compare local and national engagement in this analysis. Most of the literature on political engagement focuses on aspects of national and electoral politics. This research aims to determine the extent to

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which these findings are useful in understanding the aspects of local engagement. Additionally, contemporary research questions the validity of educational attainment as an indicator of political engagement (Laurison 2015). This research will analyze educational attainment (highest degree earned) to test the validity of this measure in explaining political participation. Previous research recognizes a shift in how citizens engage with democracy due to the increased prevalence of technology and online social networks, and that future research should explore political participation in ways that account for interaction with political information online (Gil and Diehl 2019; Wolfsfeld et al. 2016). Therefore, I hypothesize that: 1) the more interested in politics a respondent is, the more likely it is that they will participate in national politics, (2) the more interested in politics a respondent is, the more likely it is that they will participate in local politics, (3) the more extreme a respondent's self-identified political ideology, the more likely they are to participate in national politics.

### *Inequality*

On average, people with lower social class, income, and level of education will participate less in politics (Laurison 2015; Laurison 2016; Levine et al. 2018; Schwadel 2012; Shaw, Foster, and Combs 2019) and those with lower social status are more likely to feel they are not a legitimate part of the political system (Laurison 2015; Laurison 2016; Schwadel 2012). This is significant at the individual and community level, where those who live in more 'stable' neighborhoods or areas with higher socio-economic status will have higher rates of participation (Levine et al. 2018).

In Shaw, Foster, and Combs' (2019) study on political participation within the African American and Latinx communities, they found that family poverty was negatively and significantly associated with participation while those with a higher income only increased participation by one tenth of a percent for both groups. Increased education had a notable effect



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on political participation for the respondents, “a one-unit change in education increases political participation 66% for Blacks and 71% for Latin[x].”(Shaw et al. 2019:666). Education could be a better way of operationalizing social status or capital in the context of political participation because of the ways access to and participation in education may indicate higher social status and greater forms of capital. However, there is disagreement in the literature on the reliability of education’s explanatory power for political participation. Laurison (2015) argues that inequality in participation is not explained by variation in education, occupational prestige, or other forms of ‘cognitive’ capital. Instead Laurison (2015) contends that the relationship between income and participation is mediated by feelings of legitimacy within democracy and formal participation in politics. Level of education may or may not be a predictor for political participation, which this research aims to test using more recent data.

### *Media Use and Political Interest*

The internet and access to news online can impact how individuals engage with politics (Boulianne 2016; Chang 2018; Morris and Morris 2017; Wolfsfeld et al. 2016). The ways citizens encounter online news and the amount of political information we consume can impact how we feel about and interact with politics (Boulianne 2016; Chang 2018; Morris and Morris 2017; Wolfsfeld et al. 2016). The literature has some conflicting and overlapping findings regarding how media use can predict engagement in politics. Boulianne (2016) found that media use indirectly impacts political engagement, where online news increases political awareness which then affects engagement. Chang (2018), Wolfsfeld et al. (2016), and Morris and Morris (2017), focus on the variations in how citizens navigate online news sources, and its impact on engagement in politics.

Chang’s (2018) application of “media malaise theory” argues that oversaturation of media can cause citizens to be more dissatisfied with democracy, lose trust in the government, and

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participate less in politics. However, the same study found the opposite in their results, which support the “virtuous circle theory”. This theory posits that increased exposure to different news sources establishes interest in politics and fosters political engagement. Wolfsfeld et al. (2016) build upon this with the concept of “political information repertoires” which explains that the more diverse and expansive one’s news and media sources, the more they will participate in politics. Overall, it is agreed that the more exposed one is to different news sources and political information, the greater their participation and interest in politics will be (Boulianne 2016; Chang 2018; Wolfsfeld et al. 2016).

Morris and Morris (2017) explore whether there is a difference in citizens who encounter news purposefully or accidentally. In their analysis of Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Studies (1998-2012), they found that the rate of accidental exposure to political information has increased significantly. Those with higher socio-economic status who are accidentally exposed to political information more frequently have higher participation in politics overall (Morris and Morris 2017).

Levensen and Yndigegn (2015) explore what factors impact the types of political discourse individuals engage in with their family, friends, and peers. They argue that the way young people are socialized into politics through political discourse with family members and caretakers can be important in understanding their political participation throughout the rest of their lives. Overall, Levensen and Yndigegn (2015) found through conducting a survey and several qualitative interviews that “young people who feel that their father, mother or friends, respectively, hold more distant political views are less likely to engage in political discussions with each of them”(72). Interest in politics is a primary mediating effect of media exposure on political engagement

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(Boulianne 2016; Chang 2018; Wolfsfeld et al. 2016), informing the choice to focus on interest in politics as a primary independent variable.

### *Education*

Education is often used in social science as an indicator of social class and socio-economic status in American society. However, as the national average educational attainment increases, the legitimacy of education in predicting political participation is less certain (Campbell, C. and Horowitz 2016; Horowitz 2015). However, both Campbell and Horowitz (2016) and Horowitz (2015) use and test education to predict political participation and political attitudes. Horowitz's 2015 study found that there was a non-significant and negative relationship between education and participation in politics, meaning that those with greater educational attainment participate less in politics. Horowitz (2015) explains that the reason for this unexpected relationship is because there variation in educational attainment across socio-economic, racial, and gender groups is decreasing. College attendance has a statistically significant impact on sociopolitical attitudes but does not significantly impact political ideology (Campbell and Horowitz 2016). Education does have important implications for how individuals engage with politics, but there is disagreement in the literature on the extent to which education can predict variations in participation.

Earlier literature on political engagement commonly includes educational attainment as one of the strongest predictors of participation in politics. Hauser's (2000) study reflects this finding and argues that educational attainment and "cognitive ability" are important in understanding political participation. They found that education is a proxy measure for cognitive ability or intelligence, the actual predictor of political participation. However, the findings in Hauser's (2000) study reflect findings that have since been disproved by more recent studies and survey data. Primarily, this concept of 'cognitive capital' is now understood as outdated because

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of its reliance on classist conceptions of capital. This study aims to test educational attainment as a predictor of political participation while controlling for gender, race, and other variables.

### *Political Partisanship and Strength of Party Affiliation*

Political partisanship is an increasingly complicated and nuanced facet of American society. Our partisanship can be dictated by several factors and impacts how one engages and views politics as a whole. However, the strength of party identification could be more important than simply knowing which party someone supports. There is a relationship between ideological extremism and public participation (Baldassarri 2011; Pacewicz 2015; Whitford, Yates, and Ochs 2006). However, the direction of this relationship is nuanced and somewhat debated in the literature. Whitford et al. (2006) find that ideological polarization in the social environment is what impacts civic participation whereas Baldassari (2011) found that “group members, especially those with multiple memberships, have grown consistently more extreme in their political identities, even as group types are becoming more ideologically heterogeneous” (Baldassarri 2011:631). There is evidence for group and civic participation as well as ideological polarization as potential causal mechanisms in this relationship. In an increasingly polarized environment in the United States, there is reason to believe that ideological extremism could be especially important in understanding political participation as reported during the 2016 election. This study will examine ideological extremism as a predictor of participation in local and national politics.

### *Religious Participation*

Religious belonging and participation can increase civic and political engagement (Farnsley 2000; Robnett and Bany 2011). Religious services attendance can measure how engaged an individual is in their local community, which can predict their participation in politics locally and nationally (Robnett and Bany 2011). Churches are often integrated into the fabric of local communities and

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government affairs, therefore, church congregations often act as interest groups or advocates for specific types of political change (Fitzgerald and Spohn 2005; Robnett and Bany 2011). Because churches play a crucial role in leading local communities, members of a congregation are often predisposed to engage in local politics, and as a result, national politics.

However, political engagement within church congregations magnifies the gender difference in participation, whereby women in church congregations are significantly less likely to be politically engaged than their male counterparts, and are overall more likely to engage locally rather than nationally (Robnett and Bany 2011). This is in part due to how organized religion reinforces traditional gender roles, but largely due to differences in gender socialization around politics and civic engagement (Coffé 2013). This study includes both gender and religious participation as control variables to account for the variation in participation these variables may predict.

The literature generally agrees on what types of identities, forms of capital, and political inclinations or preferences can lead to greater participation in politics. The most significant point of contention is around the question of educational attainment as a valid predictor of variation in political participation. The literature raises questions about whether exposure to those with different political beliefs than your own increases or decreases polarization. Few studies explore the potential differences between local and national participation. This research will focus on what can predict variation in local and national political engagement, but more specifically on how those variations differ from one sphere to the other.

## METHODS

### *Sample*

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This study uses the American National Elections Survey (ANES) data from the 2016 Timeseries (Hutchings and Jackman 2016). The 2016 Timeseries interviews completed pre-election starting in September of 2016, and again conducted post-election in November of 2016. The sample size of this study is 3447 respondents after removing missing data from the total sample size of 4270. The ANES unit of analysis is the individual, and the population of interest is adults who are 18 years or older, English speaking, and non-institutionalized. The ANES utilizes a pre and post-election survey model to gauge opinions around elections, sociopolitical attitudes, and demographic characteristics that are time specific to a particular presidential election. These surveys monitor public opinion over several years by asking the same questions and types of questions each time the survey is conducted. The ANES uses multiple forms of sampling to form their population for analysis. Since interviews are conducted in person and usually in the respondent's home, the ANES utilizes stratified cluster sampling, a simple random sample within specific regions of the country, so that interviews are more easily conducted. The ANES also utilizes within household sampling to ensure that they are only interviewing one eligible participant per household. In turn, this helps control for the effects of household or familial socialization on socio-political attitudes. The ANES employs a wide variety of modules that interrogate respondent's demographics, voting behavior, political engagement, and relevant political attitudes and opinions. More information on the ANES can be found at [www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org).

### *Measurement*

The concepts of interest in this study are interest in politics, party, educational attainment, engagement in local politics, and engagement in national politics. Using variables from the ANES, these concepts are operationalized using either with a single variable, or by creating an index of multiple variables to better capture the respondent's opinions and experiences. Indices were

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created for political engagement and political interest as these are more difficult to capture in a single variable. The dependent variables (participation in local politics and participation in national politics) are both ordinal and are measured on scales from no participation to high participation.

### *Independent Variables*

Two questions from the ANES were used to construct the index for interest in politics. The first question asks, “Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you? Would you say that you have been interested in the political campaigns so far this year? 1. Very much interested, 2. Somewhat interested, 3. Not much interested.” The second question for the index asks, “How interested would you say you are in politics? 1. Very interested, 2. Somewhat interested, 3. Not very interested, 4. Not at all interested.” These two variables were reverse coded so that the high value will represent the highest level of interest and the low value will represent the lowest level of interest. Once missing data was removed and the two variables were combined, the final variable acts as an index measuring political interest for the final analyses.

The 2016 ANES asks respondents, “Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this? 1. Extremely liberal, 2. Liberal, 3. Slightly liberal, 4. Moderate; middle of the road, 5. Slightly conservative, 6. Conservative, 7. Extremely conservative, 99. Haven't thought much about this.” This variable, once recoded, will measure ideological extremism, a scale from one to four where one signifies a moderate political ideology and four represents an extreme political ideology. Those who identify themselves as either extremely liberal or extremely conservative will be coded as a four, those who identify as either liberal or conservative will be coded as a three, those who identify as either slightly liberal or slightly conservative will be coded as a two, and those who identify as either moderate or report that they “haven't thought much about this” will be coded as a one. I will incorporate those who responded

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saying they “haven’t though much about this” with those who have moderate or non-extreme ideology because if they haven’t thought much about their partisanship, it is reasonable to assume they are less extreme in their political ideology.

The following variable asks respondents what their highest level of educational attainment is with this question, “What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received? 1. Less than 1st grade, 2. 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th grade, 3. 5th or 6th grade, 4. 7th or 8th grade, 5. 9th grade, 6. 10th grade, 7. 11th grade, 8. 12th grade no diploma, 9. High school graduate - high school diploma or equivalent (for example: GED), 10. Some college but no degree, 11. Associate degree in college - Occupational/vocational program, 12. Associate degree in college -- Academic program, 13. Bachelor's degree (For example: BA, AB, BS), 14. Master's degree (For example: MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA), 15. Professional School Degree (For example: MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD), 16. Doctorate degree (For example: PhD, EdD).” This is an ordinal variable which measures highest degree earned rather than the number of years of education received. Categories 11 and 12 will be collapsed into one category, because they both signify the same level of education.

### *Dependent Variables*

To measure engagement in local politics, the following Yes/No variables were combined into a scale, “During the past 12 months, have you worked with other people to deal with some issue facing your community? 1. Yes, 2. No.”, “During the past 12 months, did you attend a meeting about an issue facing your local community or schools? 1. Yes, 2. No.”, “What about an elected official on the state or local level, such as a governor, mayor, or a member of the state legislature or city council, or someone on the staff of such an elected official? Have you contacted such a person in the past twelve months? 1. Yes, 2. No.”, “And what about a non-elected official



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in a state or local government agency? Have you contacted such a person in the past twelve months? 1. Yes, 2. No.” Each of these Yes/No variables were recoded into dummy variables where a “no” response is coded as zero and a “yes” response is coded as one. The scale will range from zero to four where a zero indicates that the respondent answered no to all of the above questions, and a four signifies that they replied yes to all of them.

To measure engagement in national politics, the following Yes/No variables were combined into a scale: “In the past twelve months, have you contacted a federal elected official, such as a member of Congress or the President, or someone on the staff of such an official? 1. Yes, 2. No.”, “And what about a non-elected official in a federal government agency? Have you contacted such a person in the past twelve months? 1. Yes, 2. No.”, “In 2012 Barack Obama ran on the Democratic ticket against Mitt Romney for the Republicans. Do you remember for sure whether or not you voted in that election? 1. Yes, 2. No.”, “Did you go to any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners, or things like that in support of a particular candidate? 1. Yes, 2. No.” Using the same process for the local participation measure, all four questions will be recoded into dummy variables where a “no” response is coded as zero and a “yes” response is coded as one. The scale will range from zero to four where a zero indicates that the respondent answered no to all of the above questions and where a four signifies that they replied yes to all of the questions.

## FINDINGS

### *Univariate Results*

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, maximum, and minimum values of all variables. According to Table 1, the mean for the independent variable “Interest in Politics” was a score of three, where a score of one signifies a respondent is not interested in politics and a score of four signifies the respondent is very interested in politics. The standard deviation is .774 indicating

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that two-thirds of respondents fall between a rating of two and 3.5, therefore, the majority of respondents reported to be moderately interested in politics. The distribution on the interest in politics variable is displayed in Figure 1. Looking again at Table 1, the mean score on the ideological extremism index is two, where four is the most ideologically extreme and one is ideologically moderate. The standard deviation is one, signifying that on average, two-thirds of respondents identify as moderate to somewhat extreme in their ideology. As shown in Figure 3 only about eight percent of respondents identify as extreme in ideology, and 42% of respondents identify as moderate. The average educational attainment is ten, which indicates that the average respondent has completed at least some college. The distribution on the educational attainment variable is displayed in Figure 2.

\*\*\*Insert Table 1. about here\*\*\*

\*\*\*Insert Figure 1. about here\*\*\*

\*\*\*Insert Figure 2. about here\*\*\*

\*\*\*Insert Figure 3. about here\*\*\*

Moving on to the control variables, Table 1. and Figure 4. show that the average score on the religious attendance variable is .59. Therefore, 59 percent of respondents report that they do attend religious services, and 41 percent report that they do not. The average age of sample is 49 years old, with a standard deviation of 18 years meaning that two-thirds of respondents are between 31 and 67 years old. The distribution on the age variable is displayed in Figure 5. Table 1 and Figure 6 also show the mean of the race variable, indicating that 73 percent of respondents are white. All other races were encapsulated into a non-white category which represents the remaining 27 percent of the sample. Table 1 also displays the gender variable, “women” and indicates that 53 percent of respondents identify as female.

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\*\*\*Insert Figure 4. about here\*\*\*

\*\*\*Insert Figure 5. about here\*\*\*

\*\*\*Insert Figure 6. about here\*\*\*

According to Table 1, the means for the two dependent variables measuring engagement in local and national politics are .86 and 1.05 respectively. Each of these variables count how many forms of political participation a respondent did or did not do, so the mean score represents the number of political activities the average respondent engaged in either locally or nationally. The rate of engagement in national politics is slightly higher than engagement in local politics. This is somewhat expected because the national politics variable includes a measure on whether or not the respondent voted in the 2012 election, and presidential elections are one of the more common forms of political participation. The standard deviation for local participation (1.102) signifies that about two-thirds of respondents report to have done between none and two forms of participation locally. The standard deviation for engagement in national politics is .718, indicating that two-thirds of respondents have completed between none and two forms of national political engagement. The distribution for both local and national participation is displayed in Figure 7 and Figure 8.

\*\*\*Insert Figure 7. about here\*\*\*

\*\*\*Insert Figure 8. about here\*\*\*

At the bivariate level, all statistically significant correlations were significant at the  $p < .01$  level. Table 2 displays a moderate, positive and statistically significant (.418) relationship between the two dependent variables. National engagement has a moderate, positive and statistically significant (.343) relationship with interest in politics. The relationship between local engagement and interest in politics which was still statistically significant and positive yet weaker than the

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national model (.242). Both of these correlations indicate that the more interested in politics a respondent is, the more likely they are to engage both locally and nationally.

Ideological extremism has a positive, weak and statistically significant relationship with national engagement (.219), and a positive, very weak and statistically significant relationship with local engagement (.135), indicating that ideological extremism could be a stronger predictor for national engagement than local engagement on the multivariate level. Ideological extremism has a positive, weak to moderate and statistically significant relationship with interest in politics (.322), which is in line with existing theory on political stimuli exposure. Ideological extremism has a weak to very weak, statistically significant, and positive relationship with race (.152) and age (.069). Ideological extremism has a very weak, negative and statistically significant relationship with gender (-.052), meaning that women are less likely to be extreme in their ideology than men.

Education has positive, weak and statistically significant relationships with national engagement (.226), local engagement (.241), interest in politics (.211), ideological extremism (.217), and race (.150). Degree is more strongly correlated with engagement in local politics, possibly indicating that educational attainment could be a stronger predictor for engagement in local politics than national politics at the multivariate level. There is no statistically significant relationship between education and religious attendance, gender, and age.

Religious services attendance has very weak, positive and statistically significant relationships with both national (.059) and local engagement (.100). Religious services attendance has a slightly stronger correlation with local engagement than national engagement, indicating that whether or not a respondent attends religious services could be a stronger predictor for engagement in local politics than national politics at the multivariate level. There is no statistically significant

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relationship between attending religious services and interest in politics, ideological extremism, and degree.

\*\*\*Insert Table 2. about here\*\*\*

The two-model regression *F*-test results (see Table 3), show that both the national (60.329) and local participation (96.286) regression equations are statistically significant at the  $p < .01$  level. For the national model, the  $R^2$  value is .164, therefore about 16 percent of the variation in the national participation index is explained by the independent and control variables. The strongest predictor for the national participation model is the interest in politics variable with a standardized regression coefficient of .260, followed by degree (.144), age (.099), ideological extremism (.094), and religious attendance (.046). The gender and race variables were not significant in the national engagement regression model.

\*\*\* Insert Table 3. about here\*\*\*

For the local model, the  $R^2$  value is .109, therefore about 11 percent of the variation in the local participation index is explained by the independent and control variables (Table 3). The strongest predictor for the local participation model is degree (.192), followed by interest in politics (.184), religious attendance (.089), and finally women (.042). Ideological extremism, age, and race were not significant in the local participation engagement model.

These findings support the three hypotheses that (1) the more interested in politics a respondent is, the more likely it is that they will participate in national politics, (2) the more interested in politics a respondent is, the more likely it is that they will participate in local politics, (3) the more extreme a respondent's self-identified political ideology, the more likely they are to participate in national politics.

## DISCUSSION

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The results of this study find general support for existing theory and literature on local and national political participation. The more interested in politics, ideologically extreme, and educated the respondent is, the more likely it is they will participate in politics. However, the distinctive finding uncovered by this analysis point to the difference between participation in national politics and local politics.

Both regression models were statistically significant, yet, the local model looked different from the national model regarding the strength of each independent and control variable and which variables were statistically significant at the  $p < .01$  level. Most notably, the ideological extremism variable was a statistically significant predictor in the national model but had no statistically significant impact in the local participation model. Additionally, degree was the strongest predictor in the local participation model whilst interest in politics was the strongest predictor in the national participation model (Table 3). Existing theory on political participation posits that if an individual identifies strongly with a particular party or ideology, has more education, and has a greater expressed interest in politics, they are more likely to expose themselves to political stimuli, increasing the likelihood of their participation in politics. These theories are meant to apply to both national and local engagement. Therefore, there is an expectation that these three variables would have a similar impact on both spheres of political participation. The results of this analysis refute that expectation, and it appears that existing theory is more suited to understanding participation in nation-wide politics rather than local or municipal political participation.

While theory on exposure to political stimuli does not outline the expected differences in local and national participation, previous literature has been successful in filling some of these gaps. Looking again at Table 3, the local engagement regression model displays gender as a statistically significant predictor (which was not significant on the national level) and religious

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participation was a stronger predictor in the local participation model than it was in the national participation model.

Coffé (2013) discusses gender differences in political participation and ultimately finds that women engage more in local politics than men do and are less likely to be interested in politics than men. This finding is supported in this study in the bivariate and multivariate analyses. As shown in Table 2, the gender variable 'women' has a negative, weak and statistically significant relationship with interest in politics, meaning that women have less expressed interest in politics than male respondents. In the local participation regression model in Table 3, the standardized correlation coefficient is positive and statistically significant at the  $p < .01$  level signifying that women participate in local politics at higher rates than men.

The race dummy variable, white and non-white, was not significant in the local or national regression model as shown in Table 3. However, the race variable had statistically significant yet generally weak to moderate relationships with both dependent variables and all three independent variables, as shown in the bivariate correlations in Table 2. Of these correlations, the three strongest correlations with race were with ideological extremism (.152) age (.156), and interest in politics (.150). These correlations are larger than the correlations between race and the two dependent variables, indicating that ideological extremism, age, and interest in politics are all potential intervening variables on the relationship between race and political participation locally and nationally. This finding is supported by Shaw et al.'s (2019) findings that white people on average express greater interest in politics and are more extreme in their ideology.

Overall, the findings support my hypotheses as well as previous literature on these topics. However, the existing theory on political engagement may not be adequate for conceptualizing both local and national political engagement.

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### CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between interest in politics, ideological extremism, education, and political participation. Political participation was broken down into both local and national participation in order to compare the effects of the independent variables on both spheres of participation to determine whether they were affected in similar ways by the same variables. Using the American National Elections Time Series Study from 2016 ( $N = 3447$ ), I hypothesized that (1) the more interested in politics a respondent is, the more likely it is that they will participate in national politics, (2) the more interested in politics a respondent is, the more likely it is that they will participate in local politics, (3) the more extreme a respondent's self-identified political ideology, the more likely they are to participate in national politics. Furthermore, the similarities and differences between local and national political participation were explored. This study finds that on average, United States citizens participate less in local politics than national politics. The multivariate regression model (Table 3) for local politics ( $R^2 = .109$ ) is statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) yet weaker than the regression model for national politics ( $R^2 = .164$ ), indicating that the independent and control variables are better equipped to explain variation in national participation. Interest in politics was a statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) predictor for both national and local participation which supports the first and second hypotheses. Ideological extremism was a statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) predictor for participation in national politics, which supports the third hypothesis.

The implications of these findings are based in the importance of local political participation in society. As globalization increases and the United States becomes more connected through media and technology, there appears to be less emphasis on the importance of engaging within our local communities. Presidential administrations, supreme court justices, and other



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important federal officials and agencies often receive the most attention in news media, and as a result are often understood as the most pressing and important positions in our government. The lack of attention on local politics can be attributed to the decline in local newspapers in recent years. Eighteen hundred local print newspapers have closed their doors or merged between 2004 and 2018 in the United States (Brown 2018). All levels of government need strong independent press and journalists investigating of the systems and institutions upon which citizens rely the most. This is not to say that local journalism has always been free of corruption, but the current trend is minimizing the presence of local journalism altogether. In a Pew Research study released in March of 2019, over half of the respondents reported that their current local news sources primarily cover an area that they do not live in, such as a nearby city (Mitchell et al. 2019). It is on the local level where an individual's voice is more likely to be heard by a representative or official. If citizens are disconnected from their local communities and systems of governance, it is much harder to engage within those systems. What happens in our local communities is often impacted by patterns occurring across the nation, but local politics enables citizens to have more control over their everyday reality. These types of efforts are often less feasible in large-scale and national political efforts and campaigns.

The most notable limitation of this study was the absence of a question from the ANES on whether or not a respondent voted in their local elections. This would have contributed to a more accurate measure of local participation especially in comparison to the national participation index which includes a question about whether or not the respondent voted in the presidential election in 2012. Additionally, it is important to reiterate that this study was conducted using data collected in the context of the 2016 presidential election. Because this election was unprecedented in a number of ways, it is possible that the results from this analysis may be somewhat of an anomaly.

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That being said, it would be wise for future research to consider analyzing patterns of participation over time. This would help control for the effects of a particular political climate as well as analyze changes and consistencies in participation over time. Future research should also consider incorporating some additional control or independent variables such as media use, volunteerism, income, associational belonging, and workforce status. The addition of these variables could aid in further disentangling the many reasons why citizens may participate in politics. Overall, there is a need for more research on local political participation and engagement to better understand the differences between local and national participation.

All citizens should be concerned with what is happening in their own backyards. Everything from infrastructure, to schools, to how the district maps are drawn when voting in national elections, is determined by local and state-level political representatives and officials. Local politics are just as important as national politics, and it is imperative that we as citizens work to harness the control we do have over our local communities.

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## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent, Independent, and Control Variables ( $N=3447$ )

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Participation in Local Politics	.86	1.102	0 (no participation)	4 (high participation)
Participation in National Politics	1.05	.718	0 (no participation)	4 (high participation)
Interest in Politics	2.82	.774	1 (not at all interested)	4 (very interested)
Ideological Extremism	2.03	1.005	1 (moderate)	4 (extreme)
Education	10.76	1.902	1 (less than 1st grade)	15 (Doctorate degree)
Religious Attendance	.59	.490	0 (does not attend)	1 (does attend)
White	.73	.444	0 (non-white)	1 (white)
Woman	.53	.499	0 (male)	1 (female)
Age	49.39	17.599	18 (18 years old)	90 (90 years old or older)

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations Local and National Engagement on All Other Variables

( $N=3447$ )

Variable Name	Local Engagement	Interest in Politics	Ideological Extremism	Degree	Religious Attendance	White	Woman	Age
National Engagement	.418**	.343**	.219**	.226**	.059**	.069**	.026	.165**
Local Engagement		.242**	.135**	.241**	.100**	.052**	.028	.088**
Interest in Politics			.322**	.211**	.029	.067**	.096**	.191**
Ideological Extremism				.217**	.015	.152**	.052**	.069**
Degree					.015	.150**	.005	.011
Religious Attendance						.075**	.057**	.071**
White							.002	.156**
Woman								.017

\*\* $p < .01$

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Table 3. Multiple Regression of National and Local Engagement on All Variables ( $N = 3447$ )

Variables	National Engagement	Local Engagement
	$\beta$	$\beta$
Interest in Politics	.260**	.184**
Political Polarity	.094**	.038
Degree	.144**	.192**
Religious Attendance	.046**	.087**
White	.031	.006
Woman	.000	.042**
Age	.099**	.041
$R^2$	.164	.109
$F$	96.286	60.329

$p < .01^{**}$



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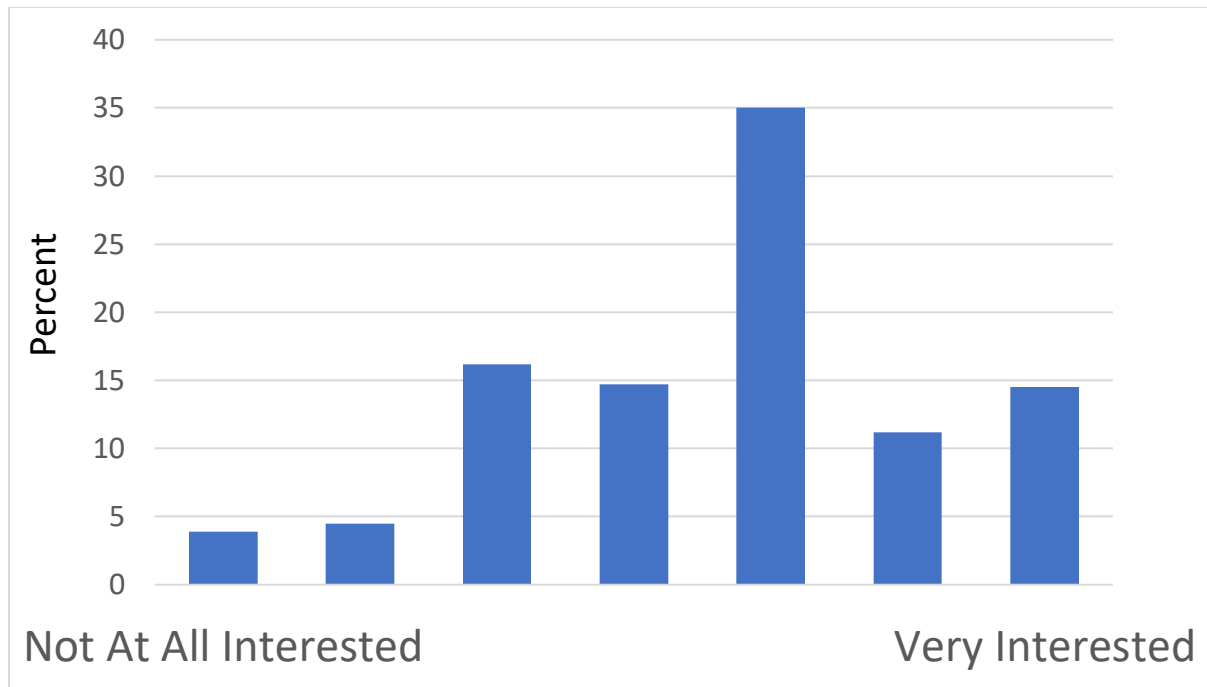


Figure 1. Bar Graph of Interest in Politics

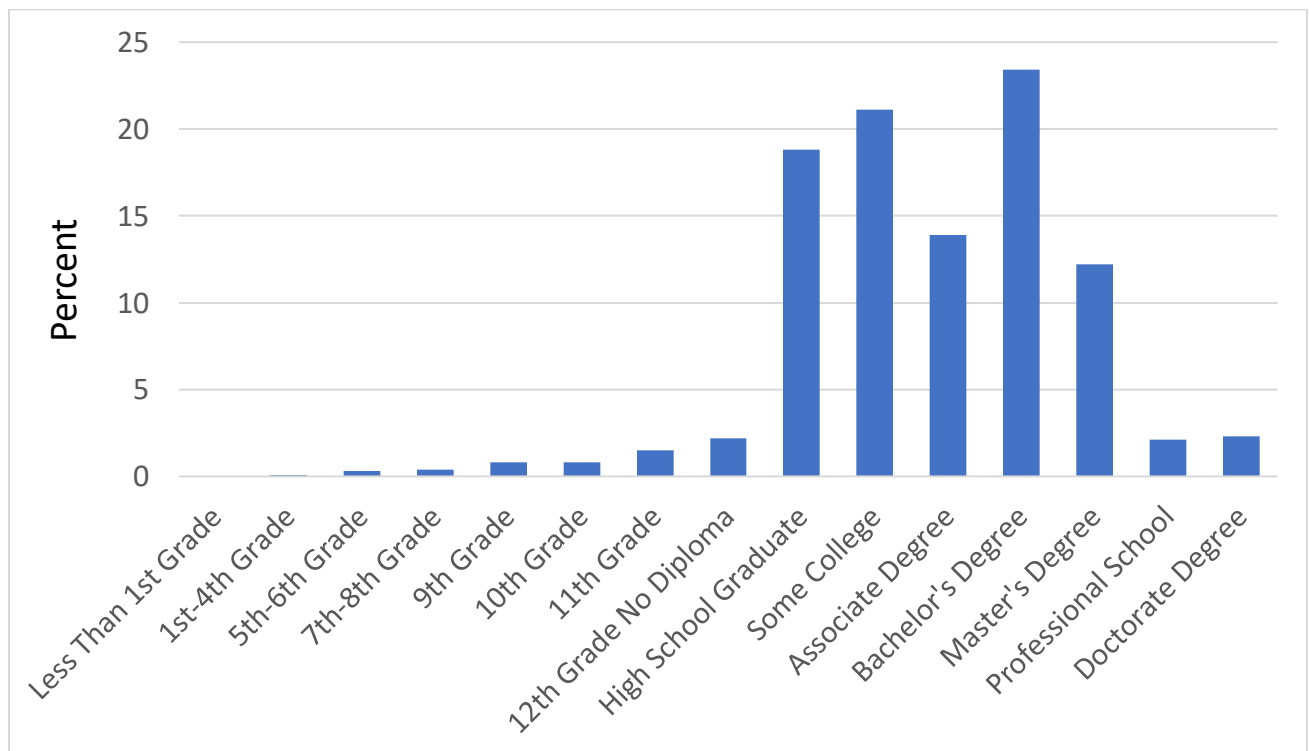


Figure 2. Bar Graph of Highest Degree Earned

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

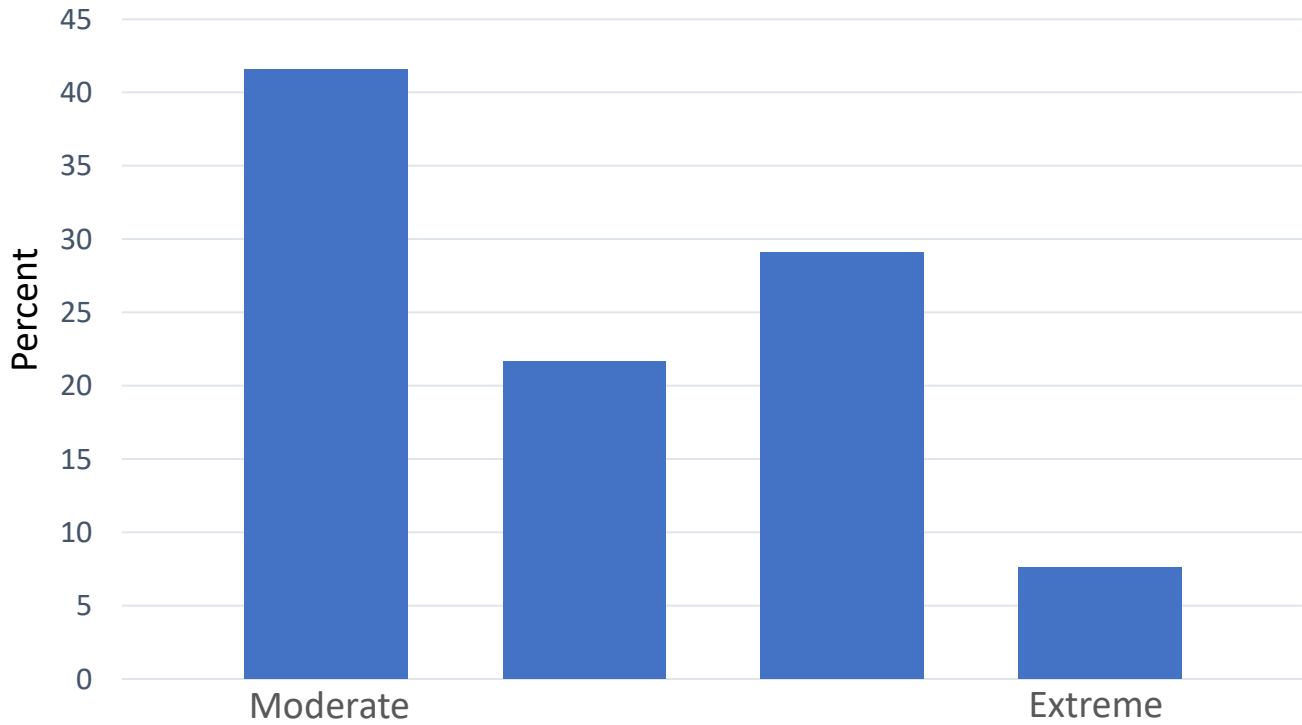


Figure 3. Respondent's Self-Identified Ideological Extremism

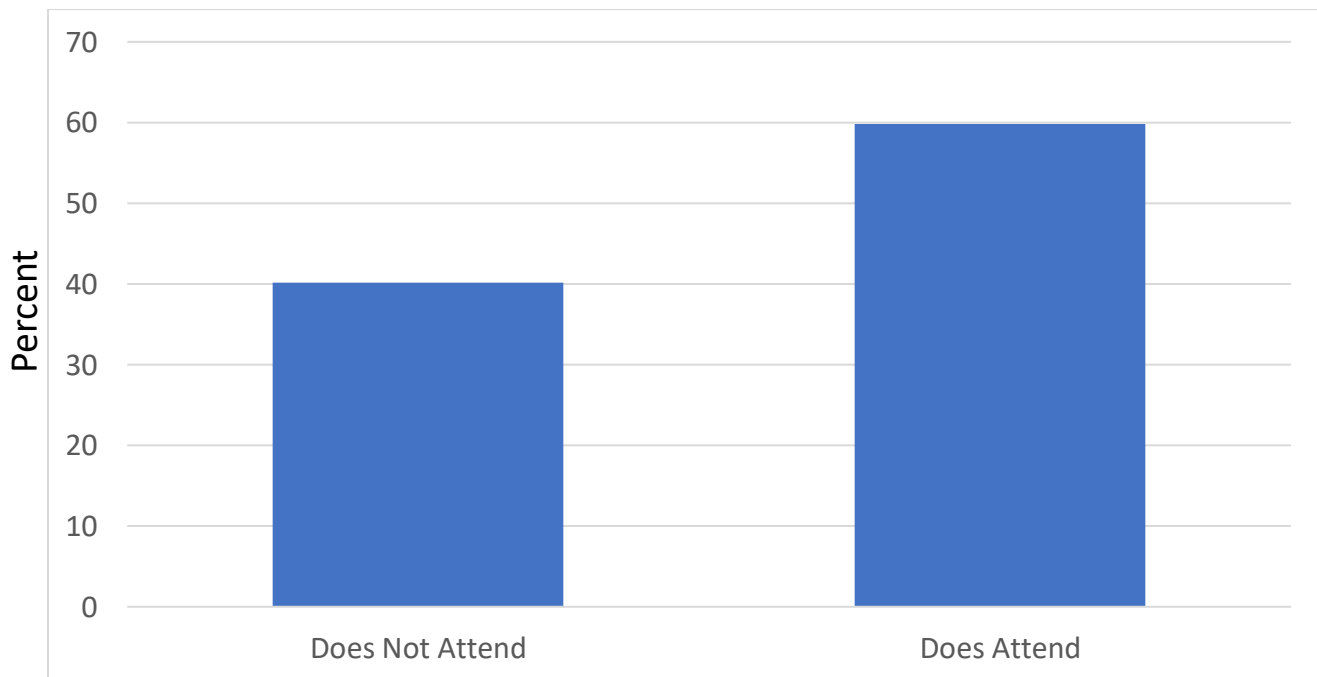


Figure 4. Bar Graph of Do You Ever Attend Religious Services?

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

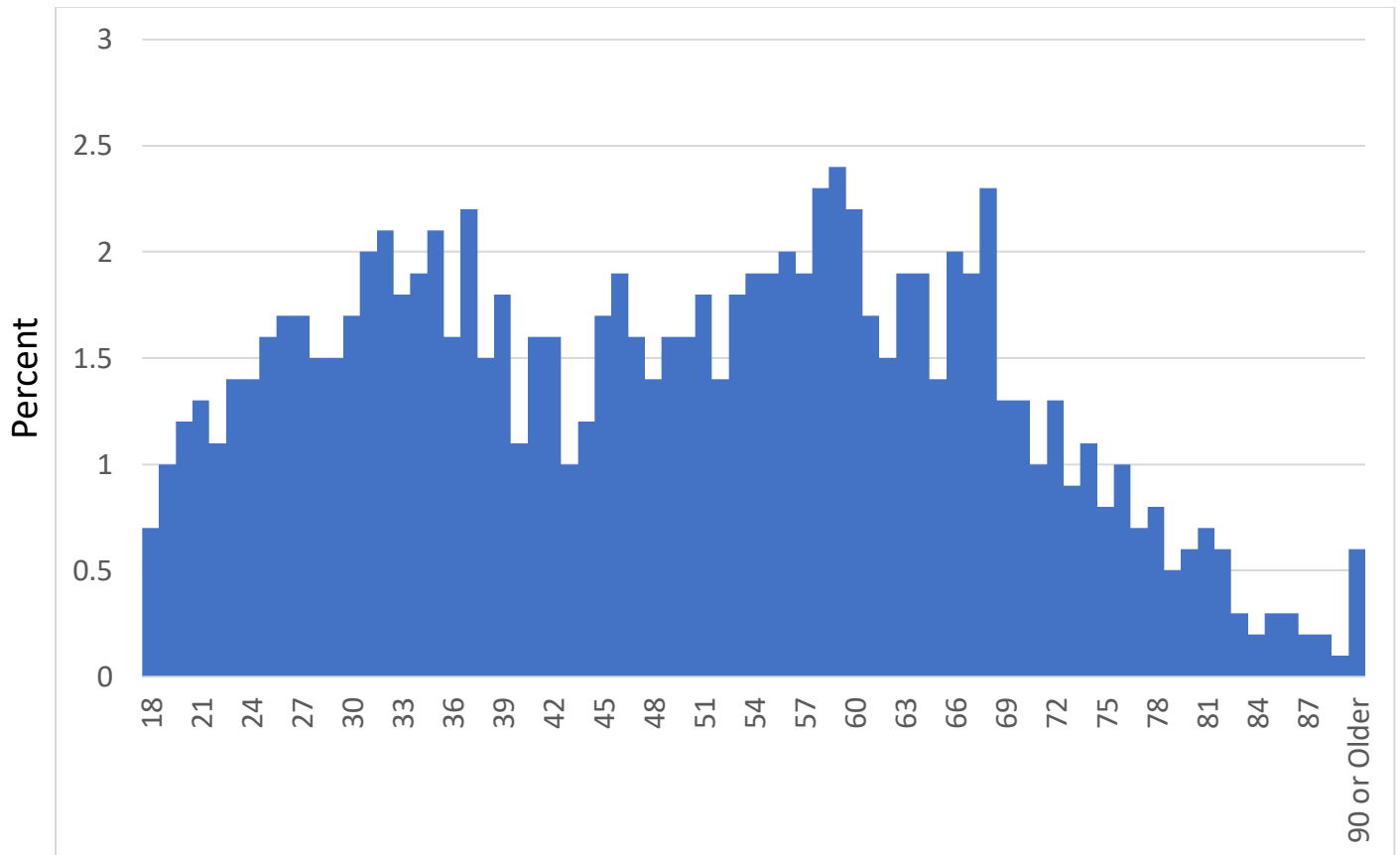


Figure 5. Histogram of Age of Respondent

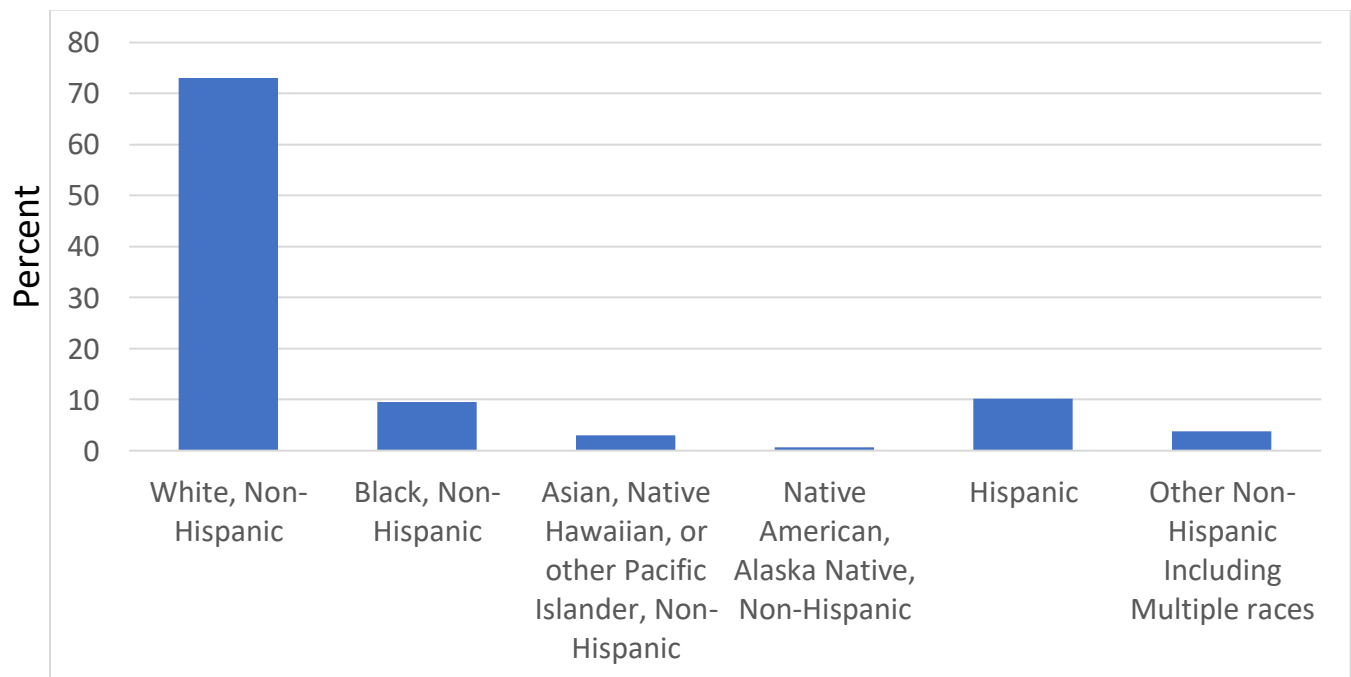


Figure 6. Bar Graph of Respondent's Self-Identified Race

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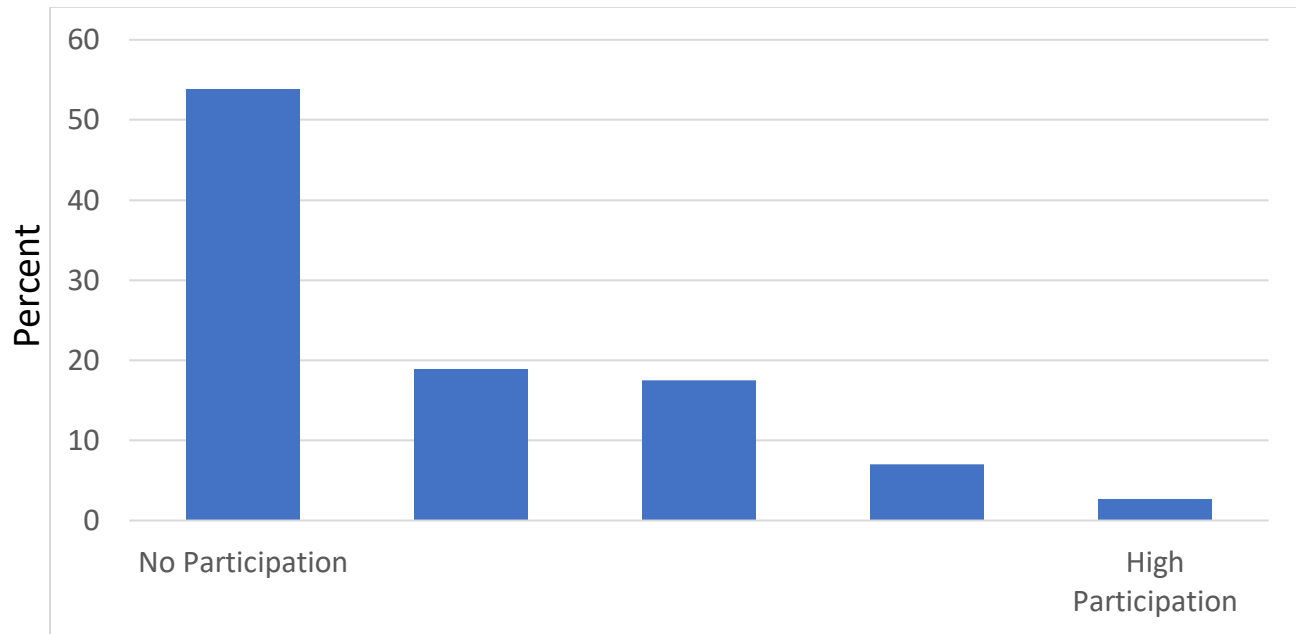


Figure 7. Bar Graph of Participation in Local Politics

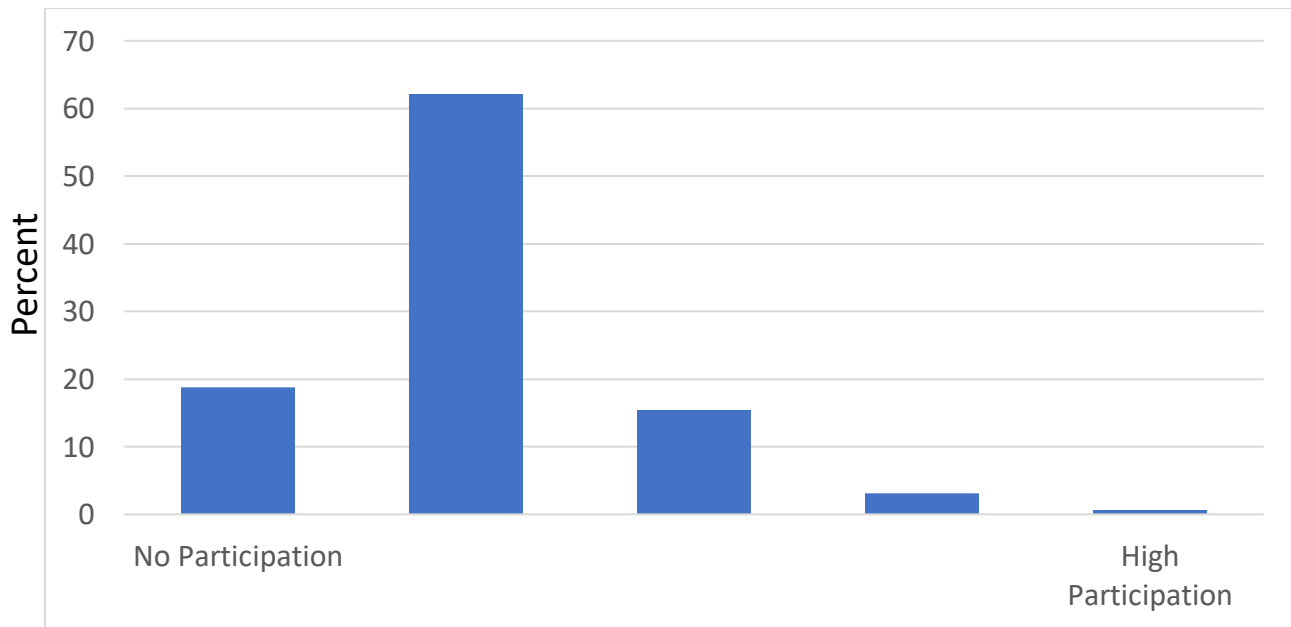


Figure 8. Bar Graph of Participation in National Politics